



STATE OF THE STATE RESPONSE – 2014
HOUSE DEMOCRATIC LEADER PERRY THURSTON
Tuesday, March 4, 2014
Remarks as prepared

Hello. I'm Perry Thurston, the Democratic leader in the House of Representatives.

Today, the 116th Regular Session of the Florida Legislature gets underway with Governor Rick Scott and Republicans still in charge of your state government.

Democrats are committed to working with the governor and Republican leaders where we can. But we believe that after 16 years of Republican control, their strategies are failing to meet the needs of working families and are favoring wealthy special interests.

As Democratic leaders, we have our own views on how best to move Florida forward, and it starts with the desire for an effective and efficient government that works for the middle class.

So rather than addressing the shortcomings of Governor Scott's remarks today, I want to share with you an alternative vision: one that is based in Democratic Party values of good public schools, affordable health coverage, and economic prosperity for all Floridians.

One of the most important issues of this session will be the plight of our state's workforce.

Right now, there's a bill in the United States Congress to raise the nation's minimum wage. But when it comes to our workers, we need not wait for Congress to act.

In Florida, we have a state minimum wage of seven dollars and nine-three cents an hour that should be increased because raising Floridians' wages is good for business and good for our economy.

Doing so reduces turnover. It boosts productivity, and it gives folks more money to spend at local businesses.

That's why I support Democratic-sponsored legislation this year that would raise Florida's minimum wage to a livable earning of at least ten dollars and ten cents an hour.

And when it comes to pocketbook issues, I'm happy to remind you that House Democratic Caucus members have, for several years now, unanimously opposed fee hikes on drivers' licenses and automobile registrations. But unlike Governor Scott, we didn't think the idea of repealing those consumer costs should have to wait until an election year like this one.

But we all know the best way to create jobs and secure a strong economy is to invest in our future.

We need to educate our children and increase the success of our public schools. We also need to make sure that Floridians have health insurance. And we must allow for the health coverage expansion using available federal dollars.

We've got to do better. And we certainly have to do better than what occurred when Governor Scott took office.

We need new leadership in the Legislature, the Governor's Mansion, and in the attorney general's office and other Cabinet posts.

Governor Scott and the Republican-run Legislature slashed more than one-billion dollars in funding from Florida's schools. They've also made cuts to Bright Futures Scholarships that students need to attain a college education.

Frankly, on no issue are Democrats and Republicans in the Legislature more divergent than in our approach to education.

Democrats believe that a solid public education is the best economic investment we can make. Unfortunately, Rick Scott's election-year promises aren't in keeping with the way he's governed. He's attacked teachers and raided public school funding.

I think we can do even more for our students, and early learning through a stronger Pre-Kindergarten program, would help. It's also time to look at Common Core standards. While Democrats have no major objection to the standards themselves, we are concerned about their implementation.

Our students are our most valuable asset. We can't afford to get this wrong. We must create some time before these new standards are used in the testing of and evaluation of our teachers and schools.

But on no issue do people matter more than Medicaid expansion. Millions of dollars are being lost and Governor Scott's administration is no closer to a solution for the thousands of Floridians waiting on their chance at quality, affordable health care coverage.

I hold responsible --- and I think you should too --- the Republican legislative leaders and Governor Rick Scott for this moral and mathematical failure of our state.

Every day we wait to expand health coverage is another day Florida loses millions of federal dollars --- not to deficit reduction, as some would have you believe, but to other states that have expanded their Medicaid program.

We can't wait any longer. It's time to expand health coverage for Floridians now.

So, let me put into a nutshell what Democrats in the House of Representatives stand for.

We're for putting children and education first.

Investing in jobs and innovation for Floridians.

Protecting our land and water.

Promoting public safety and health, as well as our state's great diversity and workforce.

These are top priorities of the Florida House Democratic Caucus. And I am happy to invite all Floridians --- Republicans, Democrats, Independents and others --- to join us in these priorities.

Again, I'm House Democratic Leader Perry Thurston. Thank you.

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